

American shortsightedness can teach us a few lessons

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Guest
editorial

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Practices related to wildlife management that we often take for granted have actually come into existence over a period of many hundreds of years.

Early on wildlife management practices, or what may be a noticeable lack of management practices, seemed to have had their basis in the philosophical views of the local populations. In 1776, we agreed that governments were instituted among men to secure certain inalienable rights for all men, that among these were life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

But by our standards today, early America was an economically depressed area, and freedom is limited when people must spend most of their working moments procuring the necessities of life. So it became patriotic, consistent with the national goal, to develop the land, be successful in business, raise large families, and populate the country.

At first the goal and morality of the country was freedom, and the development of the land was a means to accomplish that goal. But as time went, on the means became as important as the goal. Economic growth became the driving force in America as in the Virgin Islands today. This of course greatly influenced the use or abuse of all our natural resources.

Records of early settlers in America measured the wildlife in terms as "incredible numbers." We can be reasonably sure that those early Americans probably greatly overestimated the true picture in the eastern part of the country. And of course, they had no way of knowing about the vast herds of buffalo in the plains.

The early settlers chose to live along the coast, and one of the reasons for this was because this was the major habitat of most wildlife species. As you might guess, it did not take long for hunting pressure to cause a rapid depletion in the early game populations along the coast. In the Virgin Islands of course, coastal areas are not being hunted for wildlife, but rapid developments that are destroying wildlife habitats.

By 1639, regulations on deer hunting in America was imposed by the town charter of Newport, Rhode Island. In 1698 two colonies, Connecticut and Massachusetts imposed limits on deer hunting. By that time however, the deer herds were almost gone.

So some regulatory groups were finally established in America. In 1844, the New York Sporting Club was formed. A few years later the

New York State Game Protective Society was established. In 1865, Massachusetts formed the first state administered game and fish commission. Eventually, other states in the country established laws to regulate the use of wildlife.

As long as hunting was done mainly for subsistence there were few problems related to the destruction of wildlife by hunters.

It was not until overseas markets opened up that Indians, company trappers, and free trappers found that Europeans would pay hefty prices for beaver pelts. Supplying furs for felt hats and feathers for ladies hats soon took a great toll on specific wildlife species in America. Thus, passenger pigeons could be easily killed during nesting season, and this shortsightedness led to the extinction of them in 1914. The vast herd of buffalo fell and by 1890, only 500,000 deer remained in North America.

In contrast, coastal areas in the Virgin Islands are being developed at an escalated rate, especially on St. Croix. How long will it take the people of the Virgin Islands to see the over development of our coastal areas.

We all agree that such practices on wildlife in America were shortsighted, and this is why some species of wildlife became extinct. Regardless of how much things change in the name of 'progress, some things will always remain the same.

Is this true today?

In the 1900's, the Lacey Act made the interstate transportation of game taken against state law a federal crime. In 1903, the first

Bird Sanctuary on Pelican Island was established. In 1910, the first large scale practice of public game management on public owned lands began in the National Forest.

It was president Theodore Roosevelt's philosophical view when he said that all the outdoor resources should be treated as one. That conservation through wise use is a public responsibility and private ownership is a public trust. He also said game and fishery management is a question of how to best manage our resources without evicting ourselves.

Other laws were established such as acts to control soil erosion, to establish a wildlife society, and to protect endangered species and fish and wildlife.

We in the Virgin Islands are making the same mistake that early Americans made.

This time, it is not hunting, but developers and legislators who are not concerned about the environmental impact

Who knows, by the year 2000 most or all beach fronts in the Virgin Islands or coastal areas could be developed. The only way that people of the Virgin Islands can protect precious natural resources is by protecting the future for future generations.